Ex-Warren Commission lawyer dies

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SANTA CRUZ, Calif. (AP) – J. Lee Rankin, the U.S. solicitor general in the Eisenhower administration and chief counsel for the Warren Commission, has died. He was 88.

Mr. Rankin, who had suffered a series of strokes recently, died Wednesday.

He joined the U.S. Justice Department in 1953. The most celebrated case he was involved in was Brown vs. Board of Education, the 1954 ruling in which the Supreme Court outlawed school segregation.

Mr. Rankin argued for the government that segregation was unconstitutional, but contended that desegregation must happen gradually to prevent violence. He developed a system in which local school districts submitted desegregation plans to federal judges in their states for approval.

He became solicitor general, the No. 3 job at the Justice Department, in 1956 and argued dozens of cases before the nation's highest court.

After the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Mr. Rankin served as chief counsel for the Warren Commission. The commission's 800-page report, issued in 1964, concluded Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone.

"He was the ideal of what a lawyer should be and what a lawyer in government service should be," said Norman Redlich, a New York attorney who worked under Mr. Rankin in the Warren Commission. "He was a person that had no personal ego at all, which made him so valuable to presidents."

Recently released documents on the assassination suggest Mr. Rankin was concerned early on about conspiracy theories that quickly began to circulate.